

Beira Interior (Portugal)/Extremadura (Spain)

“La Raya/A Raia”, an exemplary transnational co-operation network



The action

The “La Raya/A Raia” network brings together 5 neighbouring LEADER local action groups situated around the Hispano-Portuguese border. The various actions that have resulted from this co-operation have set off a dynamic of integrated development in a border area that is now unified. The aim of the actions is to gradually transform areas, until then, considered as peripheral by their respective countries (due to isolation as a result of a practically impenetrable border), into a new development centre. The La Raya/A Raia experience is a good example of the mutual enrichment that can arise from co-operation between two cultures whose contexts are very similar and yet very different.

Key elements

- > Rapprochement of the neighbouring populations and areas, separated for a long time by their historical differences;
- > Mobilisation of local actors and local public authorities around transnational projects;
- > Promotion of a common area identity;
- > Systematic use of agreement protocols defining the general guidelines that serve as a common reference for implemented actions;
- > Joint promotion actions with a view to rapidly developing a feeling of belonging to the area;
- > Organisation of trips to and from each side of the border to ensure the development of social and institutional links between the two areas, and to create cross-border social cohesion.

Context

The border between Spain and Portugal is the oldest European border. Established during the setting up of the two kingdoms during the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula by the Christians against the Moors (in the XIth and XIIIth centuries), this border has remained unchanged since then. The border has always constituted a profound separation and is the reason for the nickname “La Raya” in Spanish and “A Raia” in Portuguese meaning “The Border”, in spite of some exchange linked to cross-border smuggling.

The border area on each side of the Portuguese and Spanish border is isolated due to its distance from the capital cities. The near absence of any relations between the two countries turned the border areas into peripheries. A poor transport infrastructure has reinforced this isolation.

The admission of Spain and Portugal into the European Community in 1986 completely changed the situation, opening up new perspectives for relations between the two countries. INTERREG, notably, made it possible to finance co-operation actions, even if the essential part of the budgets available in the framework of this programme was, first and foremost, used in responding to a particularly important shortage in equipment in these regions.

Starting point

The LEADER programme was the real catalyst for the rapprochement process between the institutions on both sides of the border. Their belonging to the same European programme and benefitting from transnational cooperation

facilitation have made it natural for the Spanish and Portuguese LEADER groups situated along the border to establish contacts.

During their first meeting in May 1993, three of these LEADER groups, i.e. Raia Centro-Sul (Portugal), Sierra de Gata and La Alcantara (Spain) made contact and exchanged ideas on common actions. Having discovered numerous points of convergence and possibilities provided by a common co-operation programme, the three groups decided to formalise their endeavour and intentions in a protocol signed in September 1993.

The protocol provides for a set of activities to be put in place during 1994 and 1995 among them:

- > the launch of a joint annual fare known as the “Raiana”, to be held alternately on each side of the border and held for the first time in 1994;
- > establishment of a statistical data base for actors involved in local development;
- > setting up of joint thematic working groups on tourism, agriculture and support for small and medium-sized enterprises;
- > carrying out of transnational co-operation actions, notably targeting young and elderly people.

Implementation

With the launching of LEADER II, co-operation was extended to other LEADER areas in the region. In November 1995, a new agreement protocol was signed between the partner groups (the three initial groups were joined by the Valle del Alagon LAG and the development agency ADESCOVA - both

from the Spanish side of the border). The protocol provides for the launch of new co-operation actions and has put in place the international association, "La Raya/A Raia", creating a network of the five local action groups and a unique crossborder area.

Innovative elements for the area

Promotion and image

Apart from the Raiana, joint participation in fairs organised outside of the area has become common practice. The five local action groups also continue to have a joint stand in the fairs and exhibitions organised in the region such as the Castello Branco, Placencia fairs, etc. Participation in the fairs and other activities has naturally led to the joint production of promotional material. This material continues to be used today more than the material provided for each LEADER. The La Raya/A Raia data base has taken on considerable importance and at present is of interest to all the enterprises situated on either side of the border.

Area identity

The joint promotion of the La Raya/A Raia region and the organisation of cultural actions and various initiatives, such as cultural and sporting events has gradually created a feeling of belonging to the same area for a good number of the inhabitants. As a result, it has become natural for associations to invite their sister organisations on the other side of the border to their events, to organise joint activities, etc., things that were totally unthinkable in the past. In the same way, co-operation between municipalities and businesses on both sides of the border has ended the mutual indifference that existed in the past.

Competitiveness

A new form of "centrality" is emerging gradually and making it possible to end the "isolated" nature of the five areas concerned. The transfer of know-how made so far has enabled the partners involved (municipalities, businesses, etc.) to discover a new interest in transnational co-operation. On the one hand, Spanish municipalities, for example, tend to be more advanced in terms of support for local development through support and advice to businesses, etc., thanks to the teams of technicians that the municipalities have set up. On the other hand, the Portuguese tend to be more "adept" in the production of certain local high quality products such as cheese.

THE "LA RAYA/A RAI" AREA

The area covered by the network brings together counties from Beira Interior (Portugal) and Extremadura (Spain), covering a surface area of 13 740 km². The terrain and physical features of the area are identical on both sides of the border: the region is made up of a granitic plateau of average height, broken by deep valleys. This homogeneity assures continuity between the Spanish and Portuguese areas and a common area identity. There are also similarities in the recent history of the area including the introduction, on both sides of the border of irrigation (1950-1970), a considerable rural exodus in the last 30 years and since then, the fall of dictatorships (1974-76) and the beginning of industrial development in small towns which, until then, had only an essentially administrative function.

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